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UNCLAS NIAMEY 000164

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ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU ??? J MAYBURY
PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: NIGER: POL/ECON UPDATE FOR FEBRUARY 2010

¶1. The following is an Embassy Niger compilation of political and economic highlights for February 2010 not otherwise covered in mission reporting. This report covers the following issues:

- Opposition Members Take to the Streets;
- Japanese Donates Food Aid to Niger;
- Chinese Pre-fabricated Classroom Flap;
- Tourism Resumes in the North;
- Italian Interior Minister Visits Niger;
- Air Arik Ends Operations in Niger; and
- ANDDH Releases Report - "The Confiscated Democracy."

Opposition Members Take to the Streets

¶1. (SBU) On February 14, the Coordination of Forces for Democracy and the Republic (CFDR) organized a rally in Niamey demanding that President Tandja step down from office. Opposition members lambasted President Tandja, stating "We hold Tandja responsible for the stalemate in negotiations initiated by ECOWAS and we believe his attitude is dangerous for our country." Although police estimate that over 5,000 people protested, the rally proceeded peacefully, without violence or arrests.

Japan Donates Food Aid to Niger

¶2. (SBU) On February 5, Abidjan-based Japanese Ambassador Okamura Yoshifumi met with Niger's Minister of Commerce and Industry, Halidou Badje, to welcome officially the delivery of food assistance from the Government of Japan. The representatives visited two warehouses supervised by the National Foodstuffs Office (OPVN) to announce that the Government of Japan donated 11,607 tons of rice to Niger under the food security support program KR 2008.

This provision, coming in a year of low agricultural productivity, will be most welcome by urban consumers.

Chinese Pre-fabricated Classroom Flap

13. (SBU) On February 8, Opposition members from the Front for the Defense of Democracy (FDD) a coalition of opposition parties, NGOs, and labor unions, accused the Government of Niger of fraudulent transactions regarding an 11 million Euro deal with a Chinese company to provide pre-fabricated classrooms for schools. Opposition members stated that President Tandja, whose family has strong business ties in China, is profiting from the deal. FDD members argue that Chinese-made classrooms cost twice as much as the average price to build a school in Niger, and that Nigerien vendors and workers were denied the opportunity to sell goods and work to construct the classrooms. Minister of Communications and Government Spokesman Moctar Kassoum dismissed all allegations of wrongdoing, although public interest in the matter continues.

Tourism Resumes in the North

14. (SBU) In northern Niger, tourism has begun to slowly pick up after three years of stagnation due to Tuareg rebellion. French charter airline Point Afrique has four flights scheduled to Agadez in the month of February; the first group of passengers arrived in Agadez early in the month. The Air Cultural Festival, which on previous occasions was canceled due to lack of security, resumed to the delight of local vendors. According to a French Embassy contact, all French travelers participating on the excursion must sign a travel release stating that are traveling despite the warning of the French government.

Italian Interior Minister Visits Niger

15. (SBU) On February 9, Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni met with President Tandja at the Presidential Palace. According to local media, discussions centered on Niger-Italy cooperation in the fight against drug and human trafficking. The Italian Minister stated that the GON and GOI will soon sign two cooperation agreements. (Note: Substantial numbers of residents of West and Central African countries seek passage to Europe through Niger's desert oasis of Agadez, and then Libya or Algeria, and finally Italy, each year. End note.)

Arik Arik Takes Nose Dive in Niger

16. (SBU) Arik Niger, the subsidiary of Air Arik based in Niamey, folded operations less than a year after launching its first flight in July of 2009. Arik Niger is no longer operating, and the carrier has left no trace behind of its past operations, when it operated domestic flights to Agadez, Maradi, Zinder, and Tahoua, as well as international flights to Lome, Abuja, Kano, and Lagos.

ANDDH Releases Annual Report: "The Confiscated Democracy"

17. (SBU) On February 11, the Nigerien Association for the Defense of Human Rights (ANDDH) and the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) released a joint report criticizing Niger's August 4, 2009 referendum and October 20, 2009 legislative elections. The

report, entitled "The Confiscated Democracy," lambasted President Tandja's various maneuvers that led to the referendum that allowed him to remain in power. ANDDH and FIDH maintain that the August referendum was illegal.

WHITAKER